

September 2-3, 1999
\research\McNamara

Suggestions for Eliciting Enlightening Information from McNamara

To start with, here is a rather neutral line of questioning which seeks simply to get information that is unavailable from anyone else about his own perspective during a critical period, the early spring and summer of 1965:

--What were your hopes from the early stages of systematic bombing in 1965, the initial phases of what John McNaughton called the "progressive squeeze and talk" strategy?

--Did you think--before the bombing started or in its early weeks--there was a significant chance it might cause Hanoi to cease its support for insurgency in the South or to call off the insurgency? (i.e., by itself: before large numbers of US troops were in offensive combat in the South?)

(I think not. "Did anyone believe that? Do you know of anyone who urged that?" I think not.)

--When you were recommending initiating the systematic bombing (Rolling Thunder), how long did you think it was likely to last, or might last? What did you think would end it?

--Did you believe that Hanoi would press for negotiations (in order to end bombing, at least) very soon after bombing began, and that the US would accept this? (Virtually everyone did, including intelligence analysts. McNamara indicated lingering frustration, disappointment, even bitterness in the 1997 Hanoi conference that Hanoi had contradicted all these predictions by refusing to talk while being bombed). Did you favor this, hope for it? (Unlike those who hoped to hold off negotiations as long as possible, or until Hanoi was ready to surrender: e.g., the JCS). Was this a factor, even a determining factor, in your recommendation to begin the bombing?

--Did you favor ending bombing as soon as the US and Hanoi entered into negotiations? Did you think that it likely would end once negotiations began? Thus, did you think that the bombing would be very short, perhaps only weeks, because negotiations would ensue?

--If Hanoi had urged negotiations and they had begun (in any forum): What would you have hoped or expected would emerge from them? Did you think that--if they had begun immediately, before the major commitment of US ground troops--there was a significant chance that they could lead to an end of the war, prior to and without the need to committing major US ground forces to combat?

Again, was this a major factor in your recommendation to start the bombing? (i.e., to avert the need to send ground troops).

--How did you hope, or expect, that negotiations might end the war? By Hanoi, in effect, surrendering (at this "early") date? I.e., agreeing to the list of terms spelled out by McNaughton in his memos on the "meaning of US victory"? (I think not).

--If not that, then did you think the US--i.e., LBJ--once in negotiations, might make concessions sufficient to get Hanoi to agree to a ceasefire? Wouldn't this have called for a "Laos-type solution"--as the NLF was calling for in its Ten Points--with a coalition regime in Saigon including the NLF? Surely LBJ and some other advisors--Rusk, the JCS--were strongly disposed to reject that in the spring of 1965 (and, for that matter, from 1963 to 1968). Were you? Did you, by any chance, believe that you and perhaps others (McGeorge Bundy, if he agreed; Ball; Bill Bundy) could bring LBJ around on this fundamental point, if and only if negotiations were underway?

--Is that belief why McNamara was and still is so frustrated by Hanoi's hard-line on refusing to talk once the bombing started, unless it was permanently halted. In retrospect, was that belief (if he held it) very sound; could LBJ really have been swayed? If not, did any of this matter?

--In the late spring of 1965 (after bombing had failed to lead to negotiations) how did you come to endorse a large and open-ended commitment of US ground troops to offensive combat? (which he had earlier opposed). With what hopes did you make this recommendation?

How would you have answered the specific questions challenging this program posed by McGeorge Bundy on June 30, 1965? (which see: Berman, Planning a Tragedy, pp. 187-89). Did you really disagree with Bundy's skepticism? (Though it was expressed with unprecedented harshness: "My first reaction is that this program is rash to the point of folly.")

How much trust, or hope, did you put then in the forecast that by continuing the attacks on the North and confronting them with stalemate (or worse) in the South, Hanoi would come to terms and end the insurgency, without gaining a share of power for the NLF in the Saigon government? Did your hopes survive the fighting in the Ia Drang valley in October 1965?

--Was your recommendation to continue the bombing pause of December 1965 in hopes of negotiation, based on an expectation that Hanoi would make major concessions in negotiations, or instead, that the US would? If the latter, how would that come about: would LBJ and Rusk change their position, or might you have

pressed on them then the concessions you recommended over a year later, on May 17, 1967? Who inside the Administration might have joined you in this? (Candidates: John McNaughton; Bill Bundy; Ball, of course; Humphrey; McGeorge Bundy?) Do you think you might have succeeded in this, if Hanoi had been open to negotiations?

(The next question, McNamara probably isn't ready to address yet: If you had tried and failed to change the position of LBJ and Rusk, might it have been effective to join ranks with Congressional leaders like Fulbright, Russell and Mansfield, by testifying on your own views before the Fulbright Committee, e.g., in Fulbright's 1966 hearings?)

--By the late spring of 1966 (i.e., after the failure of the Pause to bring negotiations, and after the Buddhist Crisis had revealed the lack of legitimacy or promise of the GVN) did you retain any real hopes--if you had held any earlier--that Hanoi would accede to the "victory terms" listed by McNaughton?

(Again, he's probably not ready to address--i.e. it would be premature and perhaps unhelpfully provocative to suggest the question: Why were you still endorsing increases in troops and continued bombing--at the cost of negotiations--as late as the summer of 1966?

This is close to the question of why he first switched to proposing troops a year earlier. The complex hypothesis which these questions probe is:

a) that he felt that Hanoi pressure for negotiations was necessary to get negotiations started: LBJ and Rusk would not endorse (Bill Bundy's suggestion in the fall) that the US initiate a drive for negotiations in 1964-65;

(b) that he felt that he could get LBJ to make major concessions, enough to end the war, once they were in negotiations (he may or may not have faced up to just how large these concessions would have to be; they are spelled out well in Langguth's Saturday Evening Post piece of February 1969); and that

(c) after the bombing alone failed to get Hanoi to agree to negotiations, he turned to hopes that a combination of a large ground build-up plus continued bombing would change Hanoi's mind, hopefully by the end of the year, hence his pressure for a December pause.

If that complicated hypothesis is true, it leads to the question, what he thought after none of this had brought Hanoi to propose negotiations under bombing (let alone, to surrender).

More questions to ask McNamara
(this is an alternative beginning line of questions: the sequence may be important, in getting responsive answers):

"You've said [In Retrospect, and in interviews with Deborah Shapley] you believe JFK would have gotten us out of the war in Vietnam if he had lived into his second term."

(Get exact quotes, if possible; when asked about what he himself might have done under Kennedy, if JFK had lived, he answered, "Those are hypothetical questions." But his conjectures about JFK are hypothetical, of course; if he's willing to make guesses about JFK, even in this general form but preferably more specific (see below) he should be no less able to guess what his own behavior might have been, i.e., what recommendations he might have made under JFK instead of LBJ. But it may be well to remind him at the outset that he has been willing to express opinions about JFK.)

1. How might he have moved to get us out? What might he have done?

And/or: 2. How might he have acted differently from LBJ (or from what was done)? (McNamara may recoil if these questions are too personalized as between JFK and LBJ).

3. What makes you think that? What evidence (not, proof) does it reflect? Any talks you had with him, or he with others? Actions by him?

In light of his answers: e.g., a "Laotian solution," negotiations toward a coalition government--Geneva, UN, bilateral with the DRV...--or covert action to bring about a government in Saigon that would itself negotiate with the NLF and ultimately ask us out...]

4. If Kennedy had done that, would it have been against your recommendations? Or: If Kennedy had brought that up as a possibility: Would you have been opposed to that? Would you have argued against doing it?

5. If so, on what grounds? If you would have favored it, on what grounds?

These questions might elicit some very interesting answers, which he has not expressed before. Do they have any claim to

being taken seriously? (They are, of course, hypothetical; but is he likely to give sincere, thoughtful answers, which convey some substantive information about the actual period? I think so; partly because I think he may well give answers that are "against interest" in a certain sense, answers that will reveal him in a light that he has sought to avoid for thirty years. If the questions are put more or less in the order and form suggested above, he may well not notice immediately that his answers imply an answer to a question that he need not be asked directly (and wouldn't want to confront, especially at first):

(Assuming he has said that Kennedy would have acted differently, and that he would not have opposed this, indeed, might well have recommended it):

6. If JFK had been president in 1965, do you think you would have recommended the systematic bombing campaign? Or in June, an open-ended commitment of several hundred thousand ground troops?

Implied (or explicit): I.e., do you think you would have given the same recommendations to him that you made to LBJ? Or, given what you knew of JFK's priorities and views, might your proposals and recommendations have been different?

(Touchy questions. These were the questions he said were too hypothetical for him to answer to me a couple of years ago. But I'm suggesting leading up to them more subtly. By this point in the sequence, he might answer them (to someone other than me); or it might not be necessary to put these exact questions, if the earlier ones have made the answer obvious).

7. What differences did you see between JFK and LBJ that might have led to their acting differently under the same circumstances? (Optional: ... and that might have led you to shape different recommendations, or to support policies different from those of LBJ, if JFK had been facing the same external circumstances?

8. What differences in preparations and actions, between JFK and LBJ, might have shown up in 1964? [i.e., before the election; not, I would guess, the fundamental differences that might have appeared after the election; but it would be interesting to hear what McNamara thinks might have been the same, and what different, in 1964. Specifically:

(It's probably worth saying that of course no one can say for sure, or even with any confidence, about the following hypothetical matters, but what is his best guess:

a) Would JFK have approved the 34A operations? (Probably yes).

b) The Tonkin Gulf airstrikes, given DRV attacks on our de Soto patrols as on August 2 (and, it appeared, August 4)? (Possibly, I would say; but perhaps not).

c) The Tonkin Gulf Resolution? (Probably not, I would say; what does he think?)

d) Would JFK have launched Rolling Thunder in the spring of 1965? (Instead of, or in addition to, the actions McNamara may have conjectured above; e.g., if he hadn't taken them yet.)

e) Sent ground troops in the spring of 1965?

f) Supposing that JFK had sent 50-100,000 troops by June of 1965 (if McNamara thinks that he might have done so, under some circumstances): Would he have decided to make the open-ended commitment to offensive ground action by several hundred thousand troops that [you recommended, and] LBJ decided in July 1965?

(JFK was particularly determined not to send ground troops. I'm assuming McNamara will already have confirmed this; it's a benchmark of his candor. The real issue that it's worth hearing McNamara's comments on is how determined he felt JFK was on this matter. Does he think JFK would have sent ground combat troops under any circumstances? In particular--even if he had been led to send some troops, to hold bases, ports and major cities and forestall collapse--would he ever have made the commitment to Westmoreland's search-and-destroy strategy, to open-ended ground forces for offensive actions (supplanting ARVN)? Was this unwillingness--if confirmed by McNamara--not a difference between him and LBJ? And did McNamara, after, say, 1962, really disagree with him on this (his aversion)?

The touchy implication here--which I suspect is true--is that McNamara came to agree with JFK that ground troops should not be sent under any circumstances, or any he could imagine (including the actual circumstances of 1964-65, which were thoroughly foreseeable before JFK died). And that McNamara never had reason to change this personal opinion; that he did not change it; so that his recommendations to LBJ in 1965, and later, to send hundreds of thousands of troops, and his execution of LBJ's orders to do so, all went against a strong personal opinion he had formed under JFK and didn't change.

So what? The point of delving into this is not to embarrass McNamara, or to blame everything on him, or to get him to

acknowledge his failure and culpability. (Though I suspect that his natural desire to avoid such responses has led him to avoid these subjects in the past, or to encourage misleading beliefs about them). These questions bear on the major historical issues in which McNamara has a strong, sincere and creditable interest:

--Was there a real chance for events to have taken a different course? Could things have been different? Could war have been averted, or ended much sooner?

--How? For this to have happened, who would have had to change their own views and their actions? How? What would it have taken to bring that about? (e.g., who else might have acted differently, to change the views or actions of other decision-makers?)

--Thus: are there useful lessons to be learned for the future, and what are they? (What misleading or harmful "lessons learned" deserve to be challenged, unlearned, countered?) Is there information to be revealed or discovered, inferences made, in the light of which people in the future, faced with otherwise similar circumstances and challenges, might make better choices?

--Just with the aim of understanding the flow of events better (not necessarily or specifically to "draw lessons" for future policy-makers or citizens):

--What caused developments, policies, events? How did intentions figure, and what were they? What role did conscious (or perhaps unconscious) motives and expectations and priorities or constraints of various actors play?

To make such questions progressively more specific to this case:

--Did the JFK-holdovers under LBJ--McNamara, Rusk, the two Bundys--drive policy under LBJ? Did they simply continue the same policy advice they had given under JFK, making it almost inevitable that LBJ, less sure of foreign policy, wanting to be seen as preserving JFK's policy, would simply follow their advice?

(This is the mainstream interpretation. I think it's wrong.)

--To have brought about a different policy, and to have averted or ended the war, was it necessary to change the personal views and perspectives of McNamara and McGeorge Bundy? (He has implied, yes; further implying that there was little chance of doing this until bitter experience in Vietnam had educated him, by late 1966. But is that true? See below. This bears on what would have had to change, to be different, if there were to have been a chance of changing policy. I suspect that it would not

have been necessary to change McNamara's private views much, if at all; what would have had to change was his relation to LBJ and his views, McNamara's willingness to challenge the latter, earlier than he did in 1967.

Bundy's views might have had to change a little more; but since this would have been in the direction of the views of his brother Bill (as of October and November 1964), that wouldn't seem too hard to imagine. Rusk's views would have had to change a great deal; this might seem very unlikely. But how critical was he? Did he have to be changed, to influence LBJ? Or could McNamara, or McNamara and McGeorge together (along with all the other dissenters) have moved LBJ without Rusk?

--In the actual circumstances, did LBJ ever see a "Laotian solution" in South Vietnam--coalition government, seen as likely to be followed before long by Communist-dominated government and unification--as acceptable to him or to US security interests, or as preferable to continued war or escalation?

--Did you, ever? How early? Was it before you expressed this view to the President in your DPM of May 17, 1967? Did you entertain this thought as early as March, 1965 (before the systematic bombing and initial troops), or June 1965 (before the open-ended ground commitment)? Did you have it in December 1965 (the bombing pause)?

--If the answer (for McNamara) is no, in late 1964 or 1965: Were you aware during that period of the views of those who did take that position. You knew Ball's argument to this effect, and Bill Bundy's papers in October and November 1964, and later Clifford's views; did you know of Humphrey's urging, and Mansfield's, and Russell and Fulbright?

All these were as committed to the Cold War perspective as LBJ (or you, Rusk and Bundy); they knew as much as about Democratic politics and were just as concerned about the future of the Party as LBJ (!) (and more than you three). So they knew of all the arguments against "losing" in Vietnam, and they took them seriously. Yet they all felt that negotiations, by the US or GVN, aiming at accommodation with the NLF, "neutrality" and eventual unification, were preferable to continued war and escalation, and specifically to bombing or ground troops. (Both their arguments, their predictions, and their recommendations look pretty good in retrospect).

Did you really, in your private views, disagree with their arguments? If so: how did you understand the disagreement? Where did you think they were wrong, or misguided?

--If not: then if you and Bundy had (in effect, joined these advisors, and) pressed views and recommendations on LBJ different from what you did--specifically, toward negotiations or a broadened GVN that would move toward a "Laotian solution," an interim coalition regime--might you have induced him to accept this? If not you, might anyone or any events have brought him to agree? What/who?

--If not--if LBJ was simply not open to such an approach and outcome, under pressure from insiders--then given his attitude (rejecting "defeat," hence "neutrality," coalition, unification under Communists) was there another approach that might have forced a different policy on him? Different behavior by Congress (as, ultimately, under Nixon)? An alliance between insiders and dissident Congressional leadership (e.g., in hearings and testimony)? More forceful intervention by allies, or the UN, or the Soviets? Different diplomatic strategy by Hanoi (as hinted by McNamara in the Hanoi Conference)?

--If not--if neither different performance by insiders or by an alliance of insiders and "outsiders" would have brought LBJ around to terms (like those proposed by McNamara in May, 1967) that might have ended the war--then was there really any "opportunity" to avert or end the war that was "missed"? Is there any "lesson" to be learned by subordinate officials, other than "hope to have a JFK in office rather than an LBJ--if that would have made a difference--when such circumstances arise"?

Why is it worth pursuing such questions of motivation and perspective, especially for one who simply aspires to "tell the story of what happened?" (Langguth?)

Part of the historical story, after all, is what these motives and expectations were, in given people at given times, hard as this may be to pin down reliably. How they influenced behavior and events is part of an historical understanding of events, as distinct from a mere recounting of the form, "This happened, along with this, and then this happened..." But a quasi-causal explanation necessarily relies on conjectures, and evidence and analysis supporting them, as to what made a difference: how things might have gone if certain factors had been different. And where human history is concerned, human motives, perspectives, contingent plans, expectations, fears, concerns, are among those critical factors to be examined.

McNamara is the only surviving witness to these high-level views (with JFK, LBJ, McGeorge Bundy, and Rusk dead, along with Ball and John McNaughton. Rostow survives, which offers little help. Bill Bundy hasn't told all he could.) And he is the ultimate authority on his own, crucial views at the time.

What is hopeful at this time (despite the skepticism he has earned about his willingness to tell the truth; the fact is that his candor lately has gone beyond that of any of his colleagues) is his real, unusual desire to learn from this history, and the fact that so far in this area he hasn't so much dissimulated as been silent: which could conceivably change, with the right questions from the right person. Specifically, he has been (determinedly, I would say) silent about:

a) his own personal views of the prospects and what was desirable to do, or not, between 1962 (when he was hopeful) and 1966 or late 1965 (when he acknowledges having growing doubts; I suspect these were actually significant in his mind from 1963 on, especially in 1964 and 1965, i.e., on both sides of the transition from JFK to LBJ).

b) his view of differences between the views of:

i) JFK and LBJ;

ii) LBJ and himself (and perhaps McGeorge Bundy: did he and Mac have significant differences?); note that in his two books so far, McNamara has refrained from citing a single conversation that he had with either JFK or LBJ (with the exception of citing a couple of phone conversations for which tape transcripts exist) or anything he might have inferred from such conversations;

iii) Himself and the "dove" advisors: Ball, Bill Bundy in the fall of 1964, Humphrey in early 1965, Clifford in the spring and early summer of '65, Senators Mansfield, Russell and Fulbright for this whole period;

iv) Himself and hawkish advisors in the spring of 1967 (and I suspect, earlier): e.g., Bill Bundy (at this time); Clifford and Fortas (at this time); others LBJ consulted about his May 17 memo.

v) His personal views in 1963-64 and his recommendations in 1964-65-66 (and between the latter and his own personal views in that period).

On the latter point, he should be willing to acknowledge that written memos to superiors do not express the full range of an official's personal views (to say the least: on some points, they will often be in direct contradiction, for a whole variety of reasons).

Thus, he might be asked: "Do John McNaughton's memos to you in the Pentagon Papers from 1964-67 do justice to the full range of JTM's personal views as you knew them in that period?" (The answer is, certainly not, which he will probably say. Then):

--Do your own memos to the president prior, say, to May 17 1967, do full justice to your own private concerns and, say, pessimism? (E.g.: your memo of November 1965 spoke of a "50:50" chance that the current course would lead to an escalating stalemate. That was relatively pessimistic at the time, but was it as pessimistic as you really felt? A better estimate would have been 90:10 or higher; would you really have argued strongly against that judgment?